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Dorothy Taitt

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CELEBRATING OUR CREATIVE PERSONALITIES

Dorothy Taitt (1896-1956): An Exceptional Guyanese Woman

By Vibert C. Cambridge, Ph.D. December 7, 2003

In his award-winning collection *Joanstown and Other Poems*, Michael Gilkes introduces us to his cousins, the Taitts. In Kingston Methodist he refers to the Taitts as "the Woodbine bunch." His poem *Woodbine* describes a space that defined a generation whose creative contributions still resonate in Guyana and around the world at the start of the 21st century. "Woodbine" refers to the Taitt yard, framed by Murray Street, East Street trench, Thomas Street, and Middle Street. The yard was known for its wonderful fruit trees, the most famous being the giant sapodilla that supported one of the first basketball rings in Guyana.

In that yard lived Dorothy and Jabez Taitt and their seven children - Helen, Donald (Bobby), Dorothy, Elaine, Horace, Clairmonte, and Laurie. These children would all excel. Horace, who was the first male Guyanese to perform a ballet, became a psychiatrist. Laurie became a world-class athlete, representing the United Kingdom at Olympic Games. Clair-monte has been an accomplished violinist, singer, and influential broadcaster in Guyana, St Lucia, and Barbados. Elaine, was an accomplished singer. Helen was a pianist and pioneer in ballet in Guyana. She was a creative visionary, responsible for some of the most revolutionary shows in Guyana during the 1950s and early 1960s - 'Stabroek Fantasy' and 'Amalacava.'

In that yard the Taitt children played with their cousins Daphne Corsbie, Michael and Gordon Gilkes, David Taitt and many friends, including Wilbert Holder, Ron Savory, Marc Matthews, Stanley Greaves, Hugh Sam and Ernest Payne.

In the yard was a grand home that served as Dr Jabez Taitt's surgery and provided a welcoming space that nurtured many creative institutions such as the Woodbine Club, the British Guiana Philharmonic Society and Helen Taitt's Dance School.

It was in this home that the B G Philharmonic Orchestra rehearsed, students prepared for music festivals, and resided one of the most influential collections of phonograph records.

Behind all of this creativity was Mrs Dorthohy Taitt (nee Pendelton). She was one of the three surviving sisters of 13 siblings. Her sister Emma was the mother of Michael and Gordon Gilkes. Her sister Aria was the mother of Daphne Corsbie.

Dorothy Taitt is remembered as a strong, competitive woman who exerted considerable influence on music in Georgetown during her lifetime. She was a critically acclaimed contralto who was in demand for concerts. She taught singing at Bishop's High School, served as mentor to many singers such as Rupert Hunte, who became a tenor of note in the United Kingdom. She was a member of the Bedford Methodist Choir. She was the founder of the B G Philharmonic Society, which had an orchestra and a mixed-voice choir.

The B G Philharmonic Orchestra was one of two orchestras in British Guiana during the 1940s and 1950s, the other being the Princessville Orchestra. The B G Philharmonic had 60 members and for a long time was conducted by Major 'Snakehips' Henwood, who was also the Bandmaster of the B G Militia Band. Members of the

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Militia Band were also members of the B G Philharmonic. They played the brass and woodwind instruments. The strings were played by civilians.

The B G Philharmonic Orchestra's annual concert at the Georgetown Town Hall was a highlight of the social calendar. It was a very formal affair. The orchestra rehearsed extensively for that and the many other concerts held in during their seasons.

The B G Philharmonic Orchestra also accompanied visiting artists such as the talented Guyanese conductor Rudolph Dunbar and Trinidadian pianist Winifred Atwell. Members of the orchestra were recognized as professionals and were paid for each performance.

Dorothy Taitt was a founder member of the B G Union of Cultural Clubs. She was a very important figure in colour and class-dominated pre-independence Guyana. The management committee of the B G Philharmonic Society included some of the most influential members of the colonial establishment in British Guiana - Archbishop of the West Indies Alan John Knight, Mr Raatgaver, and Sir Frank McDavid.

Contemporary analysis of Dorothy Taitt's work suggests that she was subversive in the positive sense, parlaying her influence to empower Guyanese of all races, colours, and classes. She is said to have played a role in the allocation of British Council scholarships.

Mrs Taitt is remembered for ensuring that the resources generated by the society were used to encourage participation in classical music by all members of society. She is remembered for being unselfish in promoting Guyanese talent. One commentator has suggested that she played an important role in the development of accomplished Guyanese musicians such as the Terrills, the Rohlehrs, and the Bumburys.

Dorothy Taitt was able to take disappointments in stride. She saw the B G Philharmonic Choir defeated by Ruby McGregor's NAMS (New Amsterdam) Choir at a music festival. This event had cultural significance in that the Georgetown 'elite' were defeated by 'country people.'

Dorothy Taitt's leadership in the British Guiana classical musical scene was not inherited. She had talent and was allowed to develop it. Her musical abilities were encouraged by the legendary Guyanese educator, Dan Sharples.

She was also good at spotting and encouraging talent. This was honed during her days as a programme host on early Guyanese radio. She was known as 'Aunt Tabita' on ZFY, one of Guyana's earliest radio stations. The Aunt Tabita Show has been described as a kind of amateur hour show featuring verse speaking, singing, and other musical performance.

Dorothy Taitt also contributed to the political life of Georgetown. She served as Town Councillor and it is reported that she was responsible for the introduction of traffic lights in Georgetown.

Dorothy Taitt's effectiveness was also a function of the support she received from her husband. Dr Jabez Taitt was one of those Barbadians who immigrated to British Guiana and made a significant contribution to Guyanese life. He served with distinction as a Government Medical Officer (GMO) in the Corentyne and Georgetown. Dr Taitt and his wife travelled extensively and both experienced the scourge of racial discrimination during travels to the United States in the late 1930s. Such were those times. Those experiences no doubt informed life in the Taitt household. The Woodbine Club was created to instil confidence and the use of the creative arts for positive expression and human dignity. As Michael Gilkes tells us, the Taitt children, their cousins and their friends knew:

Sunlight splintered East Street canal. We lay silent, sun-struck, pin hooks baited with

bread, angling for sunfish.

There is so much more to Dorothy Taitt and the times she lived in. She is remembered fondly. One of her proteges remembers her as 'Ma' Taitt, and in a recent interview concluded, "We should never forget Dorothy Taitt... She must never be left out of our nation's musical history."

Dorothy Taitt is a Guyanese cultural hero. Her legacy lives on through the works of Marina Taitt, the publisher of the on-line journal CARIBARTS and the Dorothy Taitt Foundation. For further information on CARIBARTS visit www.caribarts.org.

This is an article in the series Celebrating Our Creative Personalities by Dr Vibert C. Cambridge. His sources are listed below:

1. Norman Cameron Adventures in the Field of Culture (Georgetown, 1971)
2. Arthur and Elma Seymour Dictionary of Guyanese Biography (G'town, 1985, 2 vols)
3. Michael Gilkes Joanstown and other poems (Leeds : Peepal Tree, 2002)
4. Interview with Clairmonte Taitt, Bridgetown, Barbados, June 19, 2003
5. Telephone interview with Clairmonte Taitt, Barbados, December 5, 2003
6. Interview with Charles Knights, New Jersey, November 28, 2003
7. Telephone conversation with Marina Taitt, Barbados, December 5, 2003

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